

Moving On



On Single Parenthood and remarriage

by Dan Hardock MCS

*Some reflections on lessons
learned by a single father.*

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Losi ng a spouse is one of the most traumatic experiences a person can have within the marriage relationship. Most people associate being widowed as the experience of the elderly, but palliative

specialists and family doctors in particular realize that this is not always the case.

As many of the readers of *Focus* will realize, I have written several times about my experience of being widowed. What

is unusual about my particular situation, as compared to the norm, was the age at which I was widowed. I

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was 37, and I had two very small children—ages four and ten months. As a man being thrust into single parenthood, the challenges that were set before me were considerable. I was fortunate in that I had a great deal of assistance through my community; and because we had insurance, I had the means to hire two part-time nannies.

As is the case of all stories, life went on. I continued working with Rocky Mountain College, CMDS and IVCF. Ministry and single parenting was a lot of work and the community of St. George's (my church) continued the care and concern that they had shown ever since the beginning of my family's troubles. Despite all of this, I must admit there were times of being desperately lonely, for I had not only lost my wife, but also my best friend and confidante.

Becoming single again in my mid-thirties was a somewhat unnerving experience. There were several reasons for this—for one thing, very few people knew how to categorize me. Single fathers make up less than one tenth of one percent of the Canadian population. Struggling to relate, I kept on hearing people say “Oh, I guess it's a lot like being divorced” to which I

would reply that it actually had very little in common with that experience. Divorce is as a result of one or both parties becoming estranged and there is a want and willingness to depart from each other. Glenys and I did not want to be separated, but the situation dictated otherwise. Both experiences profoundly wound, but for different reasons. In the case of a divorce, it is because a relationship has broken down. In our case, we were torn apart (with our relationship still very much intact) by circumstances neither Glenys nor I were able to control. Given the choice, we would have stayed together.

I have learned many lessons in “moving on,” a few of which I would like to share. I was asked a few years ago by a local Christian newspaper to write an article for recently singled parents. Much of what appears below is gleaned from. Although I am writing from a male perspective, this could apply to almost anyone, regardless of gender. Some of my opinions are coloured by my experience of having lost my wife, as opposed to having been divorced or abandoned. Those circumstances have their own set of issues which are quite different from what I have faced. *For those who*

find themselves as single parents here are some of my thoughts:

1) You cannot do it alone. This I suspect is a bigger problem for men than women. Society will tell you that you are a rock, that you are to be independent and that you CAN do it alone. **It's a lie! The truth is—YOU CAN'T.** Get help. If you are a Christian, that is what your community is for. God designed it that way. When Scripture talks about the *community* and “bearing one another's burdens,” Scripture is serious. (Gal 6:2) Dump the independence idea and get help.

2) Your children need both genders to role model after. Although there are endless discussions of whether men and women are different, the same, equal, unequal etc., the fact of the matter is that children need both. I was fortunate in that I was left with the ability to hire several part-time nannies whose services I am incredibly grateful for. Also, many women in my church made an effort to be a part of my kids' lives. By the way, I am not saying “go out and get married,” particularly to those who have experienced situations that are traumatic. You need time to heal.

3) Related to the above, don't jump at the first relationship that presents itself. Being a widower I was dealing with a lot of issues other than being a single parent. So when one of my departed wife's friends hit on me, a mere ten weeks after Glenys had passed away, I knew that this was definitely not a relationship I would be interested in (sensitivity was not one of this person's stronger points). What I did need at that point were friends, which I am happy to say I have been blessed with in abundance.

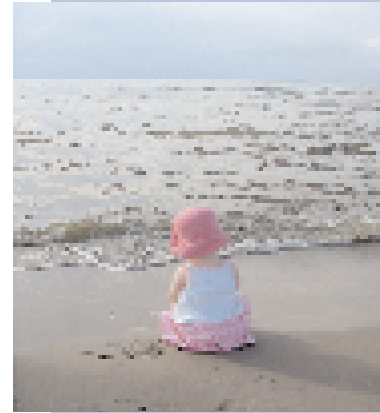
4) In order to effectively take care of your children you need to take care of yourself. I am not being a pop psychologist here, but I mean exactly what I said. You are the first and last line of defense for your kids so you cannot afford to

jeopardize this by ignoring your own legitimate needs. This is not an excuse for excess, such as doing something stupid that could jeopardize your life (like going out and getting drunk) as this is not only counterproductive, but could result in your kids becoming orphans. You are both their first and their last line of defense. Remember that. *Playing the victim is not a solution.*

One of the other unnerving aspects of becoming single again was the idea of some day looking for another life partner. There was definitely a period of time when I was not ready, and as I mentioned above when a friend of my deceased wife hit on me only ten weeks after she had passed away, I was furious. I was conscious that I was probably better off with another life partner (Glenys had encouraged this before she died) and I was also conscious that my children needed a mother. I was also aware that I was not so much single again as I was part of an entourage. I had hated dating when I was in my twenties, so the idea of entering that scene, in my present condition, did not fill me with a lot of enthusiasm.

God knowing, my fears decided to use a back door approach. Being involved in ministry, I come into contact with a great deal of people so my circles can be very large. There are a certain group of women whose singleness I have always pondered. These were women generally of strong faith, well educated, confident and very competent. As a married man, I had often wondered why half the single Christian male population in Calgary was not in hot pursuit of these women. What I didn't realize was that the very things that I found attractive were exactly the things that typically intimidated many Christian men.

One of these outstanding single women in my circles was one of my co-workers, *Dr. Christin Hilbert*, who was at that time the President of the local CMDS chapter. As a

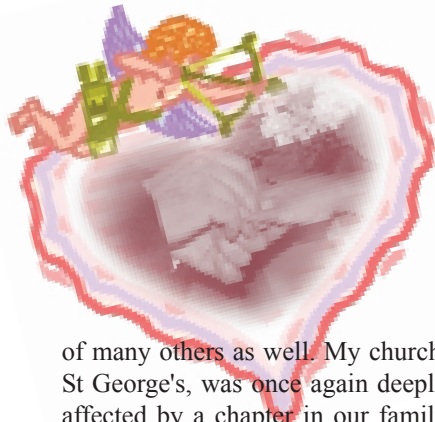


professional woman and practicing doctor, she had often encountered the male “step backward” when she introduced herself as a doctor in Christian social settings. I wasn't intimidated by her and found her to be intelligent and unusually well informed theologically.

This plays into another theme that the newly single, as well as those who are looking for their first life-partner, should heed: **You need to be spiritually well matched.** For me, being involved in campus ministry essentially entailed a vow of poverty. I needed a partner who would understand the calling that God had on my life, which included a serious financial sacrifice. It also meant that if I was looking for a partner, as opposed to a glorified nanny, I needed to look for someone who was spiritually and emotionally mature.

As Dr. Hilbert (may I call you Christin?) and I got to know each other better, we found more and more *ministry* excuses to get together. As time went on, we discovered that we had an awful lot in common. To make a long story short, on October 12, 2002, Christin and I were married. I later joked that when we had discussed a “marriage” of the ministries of IVCF and CMDS, I didn't think it was going to be quite that literal. (Wayne Elford still jokes about being “Cupid” in relation to us).

What I did not realize was that getting married again was not only part of my own healing, but also that



of many others as well. My church, St George's, was once again deeply affected by a chapter in our family life. One person expressed that by remarrying it had helped to heal the deep and opened wound that was still felt by many in St George's. The healing that marriage brought was not just the blessing to my family, but to the entire community as well. A year and a half later, the birth of our daughter, Beatryce, seemed like the confirmation of a promised new future. The household was whole once again, and the community was released from its felt burden of responsibility.

If I have learnt anything through this experience, it is that even if God has not told us why some of these things happen, He is faithful. In some ways, five and a half years later, I don't have any more answers than I had before. What I do know is that God continues to work. If you ask me if I feel a bit like the post-traumatic Job, I would probably answer yes. But like Job, I suspect that there will always be a deep sadness in the midst of the present blessing. I want to express that I realize that my experience is not a universal one, and that some do not go on to remarry and in fact that may not be the route that is appropriate for all. Even so, God's hand can be found working in the midst of whatever situation we find ourselves in.

I have also learnt that events are often much bigger than the individuals that are directly affected by them. My community worked with me, mourned with me, grieved and rejoiced with me as well. I am part of something bigger than just

myself. I am part of a community of faith. And for that I am, and will always be, profoundly grateful.

As a post script to this article, I would also like to suggest some practical ways that those who have single parents in their midst can help. Here are some thoughts:

1) Don't make assumptions about a person's lifestyle simply because they are a single parent. I know quite a few who have been widowed, as well as abandoned by a spouse. Quite apart from that, dwelling on a person's past is largely unconstructive. What has been done has been done. You cannot unmake a child. This is particularly important if you are dealing with unwed single moms.

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2) Offer help. Single parents are some of the busiest people on the planet because they are trying to bring up a child on their own. Parenting is a lot of work even for a couple. As a single father I had no one. I couldn't roll over and say, "The baby is crying. It's your turn tonight." Just a chance to get away for a short time is always appreciated. Offer help with things such as meals, household maintenance and childcare, so a person can get out once in a while. Such help is nothing short of luxurious when it is offered.

3) Come up with practical ideas as to how you can help. The more the person is affected by the event that brought about their singleness the more important this is. Often, new single parents are so caught up in the need of the

moment, they are not completely aware of what their needs will be even in the immediate future. At this time, it is better to approach someone and say "I can offer this (childcare, house maintenance, transportation etc.). Would that be helpful to you?" rather than just a blank cheque statement like "How can I help?"

4) Pray and act. The Epistle of James says, "This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit the orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (James 1:27). I am convinced that single mothers constitute the vast majority of what could be considered widows today. If we are to be known as pro-life advocates, compassion must extend beyond the womb. If we of the church are not willing to help, it does not say much for the love of God that we are supposed to be showing forth to the rest of the world.

In the second century, Roman administrators wrote with a sense of awe that this group of people who called themselves Christians took care of the orphans and widows and would rescue the unwanted children left outside the city to die. It was that kind of compassion that won the ancient world to our Lord. Twenty centuries later, it is that kind of compassion that can also bring our land back to its Creator as well. 